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The consummate bureaucrat

A **W**ASHINGTON—The relief over President Reagan's selection of Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates to replace William Casey as director of Central Intelligence turned to dismay yesterday.

In a painful dissection by the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, the man who would be the President's chief intelligence adviser was revealed as an honest, intelligent and hardworking public official—and, at the same time, an unquestioning, uncritical, obedient bureaucrat who never challenged his superiors on the Iran/Contra fiasco and who deliberately shut his eyes to information that might have put his career at risk.

He didn't want to know how money was being funneled to the Contras. He didn't think it was his job to report on possible illegalities by the National Security Council. He didn't even know whether any CIA operatives were involved. And he wouldn't resign in opposition to misguided policies.

It was a sad show because Gates, 43, in theory, is the kind of man the nation is normally proud to see in government service. Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) listened to him testify for a day and then quietly and gently skewered him:

"Mr. Gates," said Cohen, "you are an ambitious young man, a Type A personality, climbing a ladder of professional success. . . . You didn't conceive this Iran program. You didn't conceive of the whole funding mechanism for the Contras. You didn't know the details. Moreover, you didn't want to know the details. You basically didn't want to rock the boat."

"You're under Director Casey, a strong personality. You've just been sworn in (as deputy director). The program has been in operation for several months. You might question the wisdom of it, but it's not your bailiwick. You don't know the details. You don't want to know the details. And basically you're not prepared to lay your career on the line for a program that you didn't have much involvement with."

Gates tried to defend his performance as deputy director. He said he hadn't complained because he found no reason to quarrel with the underlying geostrategic policy toward Iran.

"Wait, stop, stop," said Cohen. "Of course there were reasons to quarrel with it."

"It was a policy judgment, Senator." Cohen stopped Gates cold. It was not policy. It was intelligence. Cohen told

Gates exactly what a CIA director is supposed to do when somebody plots a madcap scheme like arming Iran: Find out who we're dealing with, who are the middlemen, how would the deal be financed, why are the arms merchants also dealing with the Contras.

"I don't want to see you trying to construct rationales that simply don't hold up," Cohen said.

Again Gates tried to justify going along with Reagan's policy: "I thought the initiative to establish a dialogue with Iranians made sense. I also believe, as cynical as it may sound, that the idea of an exchange of bona fides (i.e., arms for hostages) leading to that dialogue had merit as well."

"We exchanged bona fides," Cohen said icily, "when we lost 241 Marines in Beirut. We didn't have to establish another damned thing in terms of being bona fide."

Gates gulped. "I'm just saying I understood the thinking that led to that," he said. "What they were trying to accomplish made sense."

"You thought it made sense but you didn't know the details," Cohen said.

Poor Gates: "I may be willing to acknowledge that I didn't want to challenge the program, but I believe I would have had I become convinced that there was wrongdoing or illegality involved."

That's exactly the wrong point. The question is whether Gates, as director of Central Intelligence, would challenge a White House program on the grounds that it was just plain stupid.

On the evidence of yesterday, the answer is no.